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AUTHOR Smith, Duane E.
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ABSTRACT

The history of political education is coincident with the history of republican political theory. The basic elements of classical republican theory of government were that sovereignty resided in the people and that authority was exercised through representative institutions. Only populations which possessed republican virtues--respect for law and institution, industriousness, and frugality--were believed to be capable of such a government. These virtues were to be found in middle-class societies. Political education was understood to be the process by which such virtues were developed. When the founding fathers formed the government of the United States, they took for granted the conditions considered necessary for republicanism: America was a predominantly middle class and frugal society and was committed to education. The question now is whether this classical conception of republicanism is valid in today's context. Although the United States is no longer characterized by simplicity or a dominant middle class, the commitment to education persists. Therefore, given the absence of other conditions, civic education may be more important than ever before. Today's educators then, must decide what civic education should entail and how it should be transmitted. (LP)

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# REPUBLICANISM, CIVIC VIRTUE AND POLITICAL EDUCATION

By

Duane E. Smith
University of California, Los Angeles

Paper presented at the Joint Meeting of the Social Science Education Consortium and the Bundeszentrale fur politische Bildung (Irsee, Bavaria, West Germany, June 18-22, 1984)

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"REPUBLICANISM, CIVIC VIRTUE AND POLITICAL EDUCATION"

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I.

The history of political education is coincident with the history of republican political theory. The reason for this is obvious: republicanism places the citizen at the center of things, and the role of citizen, not being acquired naturally, must be learned. Consequently, the basic assumptions of political education have been those of classical republicanism. In a sense, one may suggest that republican political theory is largely a theory of political education. This is so whether we are speaking of the classical models of republicanism offered by Plato and Aristotle or the visions of republicanism, clearly based on these models, developed by writers such as Machiavelli and Montesquieu.

For our purposes, the important thing to note is that classical republicanism was essentially a municipal ideal, and virtually all of its assumptions are related to this fact. Stated generally, a republic was conceived to be a comparatively small and homogenous group of citizens, united in a common way of life, sharing in the governance of themselves within the clearly defined limits of the city. These citizens were understood to be, in an almost literal way, self-governing in both the moral and political sense. Indeed, it was this self-governing quality that distinguished the citizen of the republic from the subject of a tyranny or a monarchy.

Political education was understood to be the process by which those moral qualities requisite for a particular way of life were developed. These qualities included, of course, the moral and intellectual courage as well as the physical ability to defend the city and its way of life against the attacks of those outside: enemies who, not infrequently, were perceived as barbarians, representing different, hence inferior, ways of life.

While the focus of political life eventually changed from the city to the modern nation state, republican doctrine did not change in terms of its basic assumptions, nor did the doctrine of political education which it had spawned. What we find are alterations that do not change in any fundamental way the underlying assumptions of classical republican theory: e.g., Machiavelli's substitution of nationalism and patriotism for Aristotle's ideal of a shared perception of the good way of life. One might say that Machiavelli's theory of republicanism is simply the classical municipal ideal writ large on the canvas provided by the modern nation state.

This is the ideal that provided the foundation of the political thinking of the men who framed the United States Constitution as well as virtually all of their fellow countrymen. It is true that emendations to classical republican doctrine were made by the Founders. The most notable, of course, was Madison's argument for an "extended republic." Nevertheless, the republicanism of Madison is clearly within the tradition of the republicanism of Aristotle and Machiavelli. More important is the fact that an examination of American political or civic education reveals the persistence of those ideals and concepts that are rooted in a municipal way of life.

The problem we confront is this: is a political and educational ideal rooted in municipal assumptions capable of developing the moral and intellectual qualities required in a world no longer municipal? To take but two examples: the moral concept of "the just war" yields a perfectly coherent doctrine within the framework of municipal assumptions. Can it be made to yield equally valid conclusions within the international setting of the late 20th century? Are the moral attitudes and intellectual skills appropriate for life in a municipal setting adequate for making judgments about the best way to attain national security within a context of international conflict in the nuclear age? In short, can we find contemporary solutions to contemporary problems that are international in nature without abandoning our allegiance to the classical concept of the sort of education required for the republican citizen? Is it possible that the classical vision is capable of yielding solutions morally, politically and intellectually more satisfactory than an emotional pacifism or a sort of vapid internationalism?

In an essay of this length, it obviously is not possible to do much more than raise these questions. Nevertheless, I wish to examine what I take to be the main assumptions of republicanism, particularly as they bear on the question of civic education. In conclusion, I wish to offer a few tentative observations about the condition of civic education at the present time.

II.

Republicanism is a political doctrine with roots in antiquity. It received its most authoritative modern statement in the works of Machiavelli during the Italian Renaissance, and later by Montesquieu, Harrington and a host of lesser figures. It was generally understood to refer to a political system in which sovereignty resided in the people or at least part of the people. It was the antithesis of monarchy. Beyond the absence of a king, republicanism entailed no particular institutional structure, although as it happens, most republican theorists advocated some version of checks and balances.

The fact that republican government was often used synonymously with popular or free government offers a clue to what was thought to be its primary benefit, which was liberty. The nature of this liberty was perhaps best expressed by Machiavelli when he wrote:

> "...only those cities and countries that are free can achieve greatness. Population is greater there because marriages are more free and offer more advantages to the citizen; for people will gladly have children when they know that they can support them, and that they will not be deprived of their patrimony, and where they know that their children not only are born free and not slaves, but, if they possess talents and virtue, can arrive at the highest dignities of the state. In free countries we also see wealth increased more rapidly, both that which results from the culture of the soil and that which is produced by industry and art; for everyone gladly multiplies those things, and seeks to acquire those goods and possessions which he can tranquilly enjoy. Thence men vie with each other to increase both private and public wealth which consequently increase in an extraordinary manner."

The freedom described by Machiavelli and his successors in the republican tradition was not the freedom primarily to attain a life of wisdom and virtue in some Aristotelian sense, nor was it the sort of freedom to act according to the dictates of reason and morality. Republican liberty was, if you like, more mundane, more concerned with the affairs, especially the economic affairs, of this world. It was, as has often been pointed out, an essentially middle-class notion of liberty, the liberty to pursue one's economic interest, raise a family, and acquire the material goods required for a confortable life.

It would, however, be a mistake to conclude from this that republican theorists were unconcerned with the character of the citizens. Indeed, as a political doctrine, republicanism involved the whole character of society, and this for the very simple reason that its advocates were convinced that if the citizens did not possess public or republican virtue, they could not enjoy the liberties provided by republican government. Montesquieu, for example, insisted, "There is no great share of probity necessary to support a monarchical or despotic government. The force of laws in one, and the prince's arm in the other, are sufficient to direct and maintain the whole. But in a popular state, one spring more is necessary, namely, virtue." And Machiavelli was making the same point when he wrote, "...men whose turbulence could not be controlled by the simple force of law can be controlled in a measure only by an almost regal power."

What did these thinkers have in mind when they spoke of virtue? Montesquieu provides us with the clearest description of republican virtue.

> "Virtue in a republic is a most simple thing: it is a sensation, and not a consequence of acquired knowledge, a sensation that may be felt by the meanest as well as by the highest person in the state. When the common people adopt good maxims, they adhere to them more steadily than those whom we call gentlemen. It is very rarely that corruption commences with the former: nay, they frequently derive from their imperfect light a stronger attachment to the established laws and customs."

This sensation is love of country, and it is only when the people are animated by love of country that they can govern themselves. They can then enjoy the benefits of republican government. Machiavelli does not provide us with so succinct a description of civic virtue, but it is relatively clear what he thought it was. The good citizen will observe the laws. "...I think that there can be no worse example in a republic than to make a law and not to observe it." Interestingly enough, civic virtue seems to involve a desire for the honors and possessions offered by the world. He praised the pagan religion because it "places the supreme good in grandeur of soul, strength of body, and all such other qualities as render men formidable..." Men who are frugal, humble, "devoted to the care of their little properties," obedient to the magistrates, and respectful of their superiors are mentioned as examples of the kind of virtuous citizens who contributed to the greatness of the Roman Republic. The people of the German republics are praised for their honesty which makes possible a system of taxation in which each citizen "after having

taken an oath to pay the just amount, deposits in a strongbox provided for the purpose the sum which according to his conscience he ought to pay without anyone's witnessing what he pays." Probity and discipline are the words which occur most frequently in Machiavelli's description of the good citizen. On the other hand, sensual pleasures, gluttony, and luxury are seen as the most common forms of corruption. And above all of this is love of liberty and love of country. It is this love which will inspire the citizens to maintain those habits which strengthen their country and make liberty possible.

The republican virtues do not consist of what we might call the rational virtues. They consist of emotions and habits. Love of the republic and love of liberty, "sensations," as Montesquieu called them, are critical. Along with this emotion, the virtuous citizen must have good habits, habits which make civil life in a free political order possible and which will support and defend that order. Montesquieu went out of his way to deny that republican virtue is "a consequence of acquired knowledge," and the virtues described by Machiavelli are virtues of character rather than virtues of mind.

Convinced as they were of the necessity of republican virtue, it is not surprising that the republican theorists paid a great deal of attention to these conditions and institutions which were likely to encourage the maintenance of the right kinds of qualities in the citizens. They firmly believed, for example, that the benefits of republican government could only be enjoyed by a predominantly middle-class society, and they believed this for the very good reason that the republican virtues were, in the main, the middle-class virtues. Machiavelli insists that those men who live on the proceeds of their vast holdings, the nobles, are everywhere the enemies of republicanism. And Montesquieu wrote, "...the less luxury there is in a republic, the more it is perfect." Extremes of luxury and poverty are incompatible with republican institutions. Both luxury and extreme poverty were thought to give rise to sloth, disrespect for laws and institutions, and the general deterioration of the civic character.

Religion was also thought to have a crucial role in the development of the civic virtues. Machiavelli is notorious for his attacks on the Church, but it is important to keep in mind that his attacks were political, not theological. He was not so concerned with the question of whether the Church was fulfilling its historical mission of saving souls as he was with the influence of the Church on the character of the citizens. And he was convinced that the corruption of the Church was a major factor in the corruption of the Italian people, a corruption which made them unfit for the institutions of republicanism. He was, in short, concerned with the Church in its civic role.

But above all else, the classical republicans believed that a proper education was paramount. Machiavelli wrote, "It is true that men are more or less virtuous in one county or another, according to the nature of the education by which their manners and habits of life have been formed." But the true importance of education in Machiavelli's view of republicanism is best shown in a passage worth quoting at length.

> "Reflecting now as to whence it came that in ancient times the people were more devoted to liberty than in the present, I believe that it resulted from this, that men were stronger in those days, which I believe to be attributable to the difference of education, founded upon the difference of their religion and ours. For, as our religion teaches us the truth and the true way of life, it causes us to attach less value to the honors and possessions of this world; whilst the Pagans, esteeming those things as the highest good, were more energetic and ferocious in their actions.... the Pagan religion deified only men who had achieved great glory, such as commanders of armies and chiefs of republics, whilst our glorifies more the humble and contemplative men than the men of action. Our religion, moreover, places the supreme happiness in humility, lowliness, and a contempt for worldly objects, whilst the other, on the contrary, places the supreme good in grandeur of soul, strength of body, and all such other qualities as render men formidable; and if our religion claims of us fortitude of soul, it is more to enable us to suffer than to achieve great deeds.
>
> "These principles seem to me to have made men feeble, and caused them to become an easy prey to evil-minded men, who can control them more securely, seeing that the great body of men, for the sake of gaining Paradise, are more disposed to endure injuries than to avenge them. And although it would seem that the world has become effeminate and Heaven disarmed, yet this arises unquestionably from the baseness of men, who have interpreted our religion according to the promptings of indolence rather than those of virtue. For if we were to reflect that our religion permits us to exalt and defend our country, we should see that according to it we ought also to love and honor our country, and prepare ourselves so as to be capable of defending her. It is this education, then, and

> this false interpretation of our religion, that is the cause of there not being so many republics nowadays as there were anciently; and that there is no longer the same love of liberty amongst the people now as there was then."

The scarcity of republics is the result of the deterioration of the character of the people, of the loss of republican virtue. And the loss of republican virtue, of a love of liberty and the grandeur of soul which make liberty possible is the result of incorrect religious teachings and corrupted education. Republican government requires republican virtue, and republican virtue requires republican education. It is the task of civic education to form the "manners and habits of life" appropriate to the citizens of a free republic.

Montesquieu is equally emphatic in his insistence upon the importance of civic education for life in a republic. He wrote, "It is in a republican government that the whole power of education is required. The fear of despotic governments naturally arises of itself amidst threats and punishments; the honor of monarchies is favored by the passions, and favors them in its turn; but virtue is a self-renunciation, which is ever arduous and painful." Education is important because "The laws of education are the first impressions we receive...they prepare us for civil life.... "And the function of education in a republic is to instill political virtue. It must instill virtue if the republic is to survive. "When virtue is banished, ambition invades the minds of those disposed to receive it, and avarice possesses the whole community."

Since civic virtue is essential to the health of republics it is not surprising that Machiavelli and Montesquieu discuss public officials and laws not only in terms of their governing functions, but also as sources of civic education. Machiavelli, for example, wrote, "Let not princes complain of the faults committed by the people subjected to their authority, for they result entirely from their own negligence or bad example." Similarly, Montesquieu spoke of the Senate which will "naturally inspire every family with sentiments of virtue." Both emphasized the utility of military service as a source of the kind of self-discipline essential to the members of a republic. And the laws perform an educational as well as a controlling function. "For good examples are the result of good education, and good education is due to good laws...."

These, then, are the basic elements of the republican theory of government. Sovereignty resides in the people, republican government is free or popular government. Political

authority is exercised through representative institutions, arranged according to the principles of checks and balances because these arrangements are thought to be the most likely to preserve the principal benefit of republicanism, which is freedom. Republicanism is not possible, however, in all societies. Only those populations which possess republican virtue are capable of supporting free institutions. Republican virtue is most likely to be found in predominantly middle-class societies where religious and educational institutions and practices encourage the development of the habits of life that are expressions of republican virtue: respect for law and institution, industriousness, frugality, and the other qualities which make for a civilized political life.

And this is the theory of government that the Founders acted on when they formed the new government of the United States nearly two-hundred years ago. While they disagreed on numerous issues, there was no disagreement over the proposition that republican government was the only form of government suited to the "genius of the American people." While it is true that Americans had become disillusioned with themselves as a result of their experience during the ten years or so that preceded the Philadelphia Convention, the authors of The Federalist were still able to write of "the vigilant and manly spirit which actuates the people of America; a spirit which nourishes freedom, and in return is nourished by it." In short, whatever the shortcomings and failures that Americans had demonstrated during the previous decade, they apparently still were possessors of "a spirit which nourishes liberty," that is, republican virtue.

Perhaps nowhere is what the Founders thought they were doing better illustrated than in a passage where John Adams describes the advantages of republican government.

> "A constitution founded on these principles introduced knowledge among the people, and inspires them with a conscious dignity becoming free men; and general emulation takes place, which causes good humor, sociability, good manners, and good morals to be general. That elevation of sentiment inspired by such a government, makes the common people brave and enterprising. That ambition which is inspired by it makes them sober, industrious, and frugal. You will find among them some elegance, perhaps, but a great deal of business; some politeness, but more civility. If you compare such a country with the regions of dominion, whether monarchical or aristrocratical, you will fancy yourself in Arcadia or Elysium."

It seems relatively clear that the Founders took for granted those conditions and institutions which prior republican theorists had prescribed as necessary for the maintenance of civic virtue. America was a predominantly middle-class society. The great luxury which the classical republican theorists had feared as the great enemy of republicanism had not taken root in any very substantial way. Americans were proud of what they called the "republican simplicity" of their way of life. And this pride reflected a certain reality. The middling circumstances of most Americans made them the ideal candidates for republican institutions as described by the great contributors to that tradition.

Similarly, educational institutions were firmly rooted in the American experience. Jefferson, of course, is famous for his commitment to education, but he was not unique. John Adams was equally passionate on this point, and the tradition goes back to the early Puritans. What is especially revealing is to note the functions which education was thought to perform. It had, of course, the duty of teaching the basic rudiments of literacy, but in addition it was thought to be responsible for the encouragement of those qualities of character required for the survival of free political institutions.

Similarly, the existence and widespread influence of religion was taken as a given. It is not insignificant that Tocqueville observed that "religion is American's foremost political institution." What was true when Tocqueville wrote in the nineteenth century was equally true in the eighteenth. The Northwest Ordinance for instance stated, "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and mankind, schools and means of learning shall forever be encouraged." And education was not seen as something totally separate from religion as an examination of curriculum and texts of the time demonstrates. Part of the function of the schools was to develop character, and the proper development of character was defined to a large degree in terms of a variety of widely-held religious precepts."

It needs to be pointed out that religion was viewed by the Founders primarily in its civic context. This is not to say that it was unimportant as a system of theological beliefs, but merely to point out that in addition to its value for the salvation of souls, religion was thought by many Americans at the end of the eighteenth century to perform an important civic function: the encouragement of those habits of life which are the expressions of republican virtue. Americans may well have opposed the establishment of any particular religious sect, an opposition demonstrated by the non-establishment clause of the First Amendment. But this should not be taken to mean that they opposed the influence of religious precepts on public life. Indeed, they viewed this influence as salutary to the extent that it helped to shape the public character of governors and governed alike.

The Founders agreed, then, that free government rests upon the citizenry possessing civic virtue. Republic institutions are not possible in all situations, and they most certainly are not possible when the "genius of the people" cannot support them. Moreover, the maintenance of this virtue requires the existence of those institutions in society which contribute to the development of the right kind of character in the citizens. Religion and education are both important as is a society in which the great extremes of luxury and poverty have not become deeply embedded.

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III.

The fact that Americans of the founding ~~genius~~ GENERATION' as well as their predecessors in the republican tradition believed these things to be true does not, of course, make them true. Nevertheless, the evidence we can command suggests that their views possess considerable merit. There is probably much truth in the proposition that men who cannot be governed by the simple force of the law can only be ruled by an almost tyrannical power. There is good reason to suppose that men who lack civic virtue cannot enjoy the benefits of free government.

What does all of this suggest about our present circumstances? If American society was once characterized by republican simplicity, it seems reasonable to suggest that it no longer is. Luxury, the great enemy of republicanism, is evident and widely admired, as well as envied. Great poverty has become a reality in American life, and those social conditions which once were thought to contribute to a sort of natural republican virtue do not now exist, at least to the extent that they once did. If it was once possible to take for granted the salutary influence of religion on the public character of the citizens, this is no longer so. It is not unfair to suggest that America has become one of the most secularized of all countries as far as its public life is concerned. I am not here interested in judging whether this development is good or bad, nor do I wish to debate current interpretations of the meaning of the first Amendment. What does seem clear is that if the Founders were correct in thinking that religion was an important support for civic virtue, and we can no longer take the influence of religion for granted, we may have to face up to the problem of finding a substitute. This leaves us with education. It is no doubt true that education has become overburdened, given the task of solving a variety of problems in our society for many of which it is not necessarily well suited. Nevertheless, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that under the circumstances, education has an even greater responsibility than in the past to attempt to shape and mold the character of student in a way that meets the requirements of civic virtue. Civic education, in short, may well be more important than it ever has been in the past.

The problem, of course, is what sort of education ought the citizens to receive? How is civic education to be transmitted. In these over-schooled times, it is useful to remind ourselves that just as a large part of one's education is acquired outside of the confines of the classroom, so with civic education. The school can hardly make up for the failures of the larger society. (For a discussion of this problem, see Morris Janowitz's recent book, The Reconstruction of Patriotism: Education for Civic Consciousness.)

As for the schools, it is not exciting, but probably necessary, to reiterate the need for liberal education. It is difficult to see how a student can be better prepared for the complexities of modern life than an education rooted in the study of history, language, literature, and so on. To the extent that a liberal education represents a reaching out, it is difficult to think of an education that better enables a student to live not only in his own comparatively small world, but to tolerate the necessary ambiguity of a world of international complexity.

But the great theorists of the past insisted that civic virtue was more than a matter of acquired knowledge. The major difficulty that many modern readers are likely to have with writers such as Machiavelli and Montesquieu is the insistence of these writers that the necessary foundation of republican virtue is love of country, which is to say, patriotism. It is now widely believed that patriotism and nationalism are the causes of most of the world's ills and are utterly incompatible with civilized life in the international community. One may wonder if this belief is not based on a confusion of patriotism with jingoism, and a failure to appreciate the need for a sense of place, a need that probably cannot be satisfied by some notion of world citizenship, a concept of vast, echoing emptiness. Moreover, a citizens' devotion to his own place is not necessarily incompatible with the recognition that he also lives in and is part of a larger society.

I raise these questions, not to resolve them, but to suggest that they ought to be considered. Much of our current thinking about citizenship seems to me based on a series of unexamined assumptions: patriotism is bad, nationalism is outmoded, political systems are different but never better or worse, and so on. Perhaps the goal of civic education in these complex times should be to teach students that there are indeed Greeks and Barbarians, it is often necessary, if distasteful, for them to live together, and to provide the emerging citizen with the intellectual and emotional skills to accept this condition.